

□

November 9, 2011 | A call for reform in Pakistan's schools□ - Washington Post

By [Leonard A. Leo](#) and [Elizabeth H. Prodromou](#)

Education is a powerful force that shapes how individuals respond to fundamental differences of opinion and belief. It can encourage tolerance and respect for all, but it can also foster disdain and contempt for those who dissent from prevailing orthodoxies.

In Pakistan, schools often serve as incubators of societal intolerance, especially toward religious minorities, with profoundly negative implications for religious freedom and security. Such is the finding of a new report, "Connecting the Dots: Education and Religious Discrimination in Pakistan." Released today by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), on which we serve, this study was conducted by the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), a think tank based in Washington, D.C.

Connecting the Dots: Education and Religious Discrimination in Pakistan

ICRD, which has worked with Pakistani madrassas (religious schools) for over seven years, partnered with the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, an independent think tank in Pakistan, to conduct field research in four provinces -- Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North West Frontier Province), Balochistan, Sindh, and Punjab – to analyze the curriculum of public schools and madrassas. ICRD also examined pedagogical methods, conducting interviews and surveys of teachers and students regarding their views on Pakistan's religious minorities. Project researchers visited 37 middle schools and high schools, and spoke with 277 students and teachers. They queried 226 students and teachers from 19 madrassas.

The goal was to assess the impact of textbooks and teaching practices on student attitudes toward religious minorities. The report's findings suggest that linkages exist between deficits in religious freedom and societal forms of discrimination and violence. More broadly, the report provides important data supporting the importance of education in promoting tolerance of religious diversity and pluralism. Improvements in tolerance and religious freedom could significantly enhance political freedoms and social stability in Pakistan.

According to the report, Pakistan's public schools and privately run and funded religious madrassas have an unmistakable tendency to devalue minority religious groups, fostering a climate conducive to acts of discrimination and even violence against them. These acts violate religious freedom and threaten the security not only of Pakistan, but also its neighbors, including Afghanistan.

Some of the key findings of the study are as follows:

In Pakistan's public schools, all children, regardless of their faith, are forced to learn from textbooks that often had a strong Islamic orientation and frequently omitted mention of Pakistan's religious minorities or made derogatory references to them. While non-Muslims are technically allowed to study alternative subjects, this has not been implemented in practice.

Hindus were depicted in especially negative ways, as enemies of Pakistan and Muslims, and descriptions of Christians were often erroneous, painting a distorted picture of Pakistan's largest religious minority.

Teacher instruction in public schools and madrassas misrepresented religious minorities and their beliefs, and a large portion of their students failed to identify religious minorities as Pakistani citizens.

Teachers typically expressed negative views about Ahmadis, Christians, and Jews, and passed them along to their pupils.

To be sure, not all of the report's findings were negative. Interviewees occasionally expressed sentiments of tolerance along with their neutral or intolerant comments, offering hope for reforms to the educational system that could have broader, positive effects on Pakistan's religious freedom conditions.

All in all, however, the report's key findings present serious concerns about the role of education in providing misinformation about, and shaping opinions against, Pakistan's religious minority communities (Muslim and non-Muslim alike), fostering intolerance toward their members.

The consequences of this intolerance are chillingly evident. From Shi'a and Sufi Muslims to Ahmadis and Christians, Pakistan's religious minorities face a culture of impunity through violence and serious discrimination. In addition, Pakistan's laws violate international standards by criminalizing Ahmadi religious practice, and maintaining a blasphemy law that results in minorities and dissenters targeted for arrest, and even at times death. Over the past decade, Pakistan has suffered from repeated bouts of religious-related violence, with extremists launching attacks against both Muslims and non-Muslims.

If Pakistan is to combat religious intolerance and discrimination and stem the tide of violent religious extremism, reform of its educational system, including both public schools and madrassas, is an urgent priority.

To that end, Pakistan should ensure that national textbook and curricula standards promote religious tolerance and establish review and enforcement mechanisms to ascertain that public schools are meeting them. Pakistan's government should replace current public school textbooks with ones that exclude messages of intolerance, hatred, or violence based on religious or other differences. A madrassa oversight board should be empowered to develop, implement, and train teachers in human rights standards, as well as oversee madrassa curricula and teaching standards.

Respect for human rights and religious freedom demands spotlighting these problems in Pakistan's schools and urging dramatic reform. The interests of peace and security, both domestically and regionally, warrant immediate and deliberate policy responses to support educational reform in Pakistan.

Leonard A. Leo serves as Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

Dr. Elizabeth H. Prodromou serves as Vice Chair of USCIRF.